



BITTERROOT RIVER DRAINAGE

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The Bitterroot River drainage includes the Bitterroot River and its tributaries, including the East and West Forks of the Bitterroot River, Lolo Creek and their tributaries. The Bitterroot River begins at the junction of East and West Forks. It flows northward for 80 miles through Ravalli and Missoula Counties, draining a 1,891 square-mile basin to Missoula, where it joins the Clark Fork River. The Bitterroot watershed includes 9,000-foot peaks in the headwaters and heavily forested slopes, rangelands and wetlands on the valley floor. The headwaters of most of the tributaries originate on the Bitterroot National Forest. The East Fork of the Bitterroot River begins in the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness. Tributaries of the West Fork Bitterroot River and the Bitterroot River from the west drain out of the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness.

There are 83 natural lakes and reservoirs in the drainage, totaling 3,070 surface acres. Most natural lakes are mountain lakes in the headwaters of the Anaconda-Pintler and Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness areas. Two large reservoirs are Lake Como and Painted Rocks Reservoir. Lake Como receives considerable human use for fishing and other recreational activities. It also contributes about 3,000 acre-feet of water to the Bitterroot River each year. Painted Rocks Reservoir supplies 25,000 acre-feet of water to the Bitterroot River for instream flows and irrigation. Both Lake Como and Painted Rocks Reservoir experience considerable drawdown on an annual basis.

FISHERIES MANAGEMENT

Located in the southwestern part of the state, the Bitterroot River is very popular for recreation. The mainstem river is generally ranked with the top five in the state for fishing pressure, which generally exceeds 100,000 angler days a year. The river's outstanding natural resources and diversity of recreational opportunities, combined with its proximity to Missoula, contribute to its popularity.

The Bitterroot River is managed as a wild trout fishery, emphasizing natural reproduction. The basin is also a focus area for native fish recovery efforts. The Bitterroot River is home to 10 native fish species including bull trout, westslope cutthroat trout, mountain whitefish, northern pike minnow, longnose dace, redbelly shiner, peamouth, longnose and largescale sucker, and Columbia slimy sculpin. Nonnative fish species inhabiting the Bitterroot include brown trout, brook trout, rainbow trout, northern pike, and largemouth bass. Dominant fish species vary from westslope cutthroat in the headwaters to mountain whitefish in the Bitterroot River. Other than mountain whitefish, rainbow trout are the dominant sportfish in the mainstem of the Bitterroot River. Brown trout have increased in numbers in the East and West Forks of the Bitterroot drainage and some tributaries over the past 10 years. Coincident with the brown trout expansion is the decline of rainbow trout in the upper Bitterroot drainage. Whirling disease is believed to be the primary reason for this decline. Fishing regulations are designed to allow more harvest of brown trout in these areas. Lolo Creek is also dominated by brown trout, but transitions into brook trout and westslope cutthroat trout populations in headwater areas. Information is lacking on the abundance and life histories of mountain whitefish and non-game native fishes. Efforts are needed to describe these and monitor trends.

Bull trout are rare in the mainstem of the Bitterroot River. Fluvial forms exist in the East and West Forks, but are also uncommon. Adfluvial lifeforms exist primarily in Painted Rocks Reservoir. Resident lifeforms exist in many smaller tributaries throughout the drainage.

Angling occurs year-round and is most popular in the early spring, summer and fall. Opportunities exist for both wade and float angling and while fly-fishing is particularly popular, artificial lures and bait fishing is also common.

Angling restrictions have improved westslope cutthroat trout numbers in the Bitterroot River upstream of Hamilton, but are less effective below Hamilton. Therefore, efforts in the Bitterroot River drainage to favor native salmonids (trout and whitefish) should be focused upstream of Hamilton. The greatest improvements for native salmonids are likely to be in tributaries or river sections where they dominate. Conversely, the Bitterroot River drainage below Hamilton should have an emphasis of restoring ecosystem function for all salmonids. Native salmonids in this area should be protected, or enhanced if possible.

Lake Como and Painted Rocks Reservoir offer some angling opportunity. Lake Como is stocked annually with catchable rainbow trout and westslope cutthroat trout. Due to the significant drawdowns and low productivity, fishing is only fair in each reservoir.

Some high mountain lakes are stocked with westslope cutthroat trout and some support wild populations of cutthroat, rainbow and brook trout. Most lakes are kept fishless to help conserve other native fauna (e.g., amphibian populations). Unstocked lakes comprise a geographic distribution and range of sizes and depths thought to help amphibian populations.

HABITAT

The Bitterroot River, particularly downstream of Hamilton, has been subject to dewatering. Prior to the early 1980's, irrigation demands significantly depleted streamflows during midsummer. Based on fisheries studies in the early 1980's and an agreement with the local irrigators and the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, water from Painted Rocks Reservoir began to be released during midsummer to supplement flows in the river. Since that time, a Bitterroot River water commissioner has been appointed each year to manage releases and withdrawals from the river to maintain minimum streamflows targeted at Bell Crossing, where a USGS gage was established. The target minimum flow of about 400 cfs at Bell Crossing is met during wet years, but not during very dry years, when streamflows can drop to below 200 cfs. In the early 1990's the dam at Lake Como was raised 3 feet and the extra stored water is released into the Bitterroot River after Labor Day each year.

Many of the tributaries of the Bitterroot River are also subject to midsummer dewatering. Efforts to restore streamflows to these streams have been difficult. Dewatering of tributaries remains one of the most serious issues for the fishery in the Bitterroot River. Rainbow and Brown trout spawn in the lower ends of these tributaries and the river. Native trout spawn in streams on the Bitterroot National Forest.

Water temperature in the Bitterroot River often exceeds 72°F in the lower reaches. During particularly warm summers, fishing restrictions have been implemented until water temperatures drop to more tolerable levels for trout.

Homes and agricultural development along the Bitterroot River have led to the need for streambank stabilization. The Bitterroot River migrates laterally long distances in some years, which endangers homes and other developments that are near the river. As a consequence, approximately 12.5% of the streambanks on the river have been stabilized, mostly to protect residential development. This is an ongoing issue due to the fact that streambank stabilization is usually disruptive of recreational uses and alters some of the natural functions of the river. More stringent regulations in recent years have slowed homebuilding within the floodplain, and have prevented some of the building of riverfront homes that are often threatened by the migration of the river.

Lolo Creek is also a stream that has been heavily impacted by bank stabilization. Much of the mainstem channel was relocated or altered during the construction of U.S. Highway 12. Conservation efforts have focused on the upper watershed. In 2010-2011, thousands of acres of corporate timberlands in the upper basin were converted to public ownership (managed by USFS) as part of the “Montana Legacy Project”.

Water quality in the Bitterroot is high with some indication of high nutrient levels in the lower river. Suspended sediment in the river is generally low, except during spring runoff when the river experiences increased turbidity. The Montana Department of Environmental Quality classifies the Bitterroot as a B-1 stream, meaning the river should be maintained for activities such as drinking and municipal uses, swimming and recreation, growth and propagation of trout and associated aquatic life, and as an agricultural and industrial water supply.

FISHING ACCESS

Fishing access to the Bitterroot River is excellent. There are 13 fishing access sites along the mainstem of the Bitterroot River managed by MFWP. In addition, there are several publicly owned or managed sites along the river that are commonly used by anglers. Along the East and West Forks of the Bitterroot River, public access is good due to the public lands managed by the Bitterroot National Forest. Some of these sites are managed as fishing access sites and others are informally used by anglers. Lolo Creek also has a number of public access sites that are managed by FWP and the USFS.

SPECIAL MANAGEMENT ISSUES

Social Conflicts on the Bitterroot River

Presently, there is no River Recreation Plan in effect for the Bitterroot River. Due to high angling pressure, there are some social conflicts. On the West Fork of the Bitterroot River, information is being collected to understand when and where conflicts occur.

FISHERIES MANAGEMENT DIRECTION FOR BITTERROOT RIVER DRAINAGE

Water	Miles/acres	Species	Origin	Management Type	Management Direction
West Fork Bitterroot River and Tributaries Including Painted Rocks Reservoir	565 acres of reservoir and 42 miles of mainstem	Bull trout	Wild	Conservation	Continue yearlong closure on angling for bull trout and enhance migratory populations for conservation.
		Westslope cutthroat trout	Wild	Conservation/ Special Regulations	Maintain or enhance numbers above present levels for conservation and angling. Investigate the genetics of the westslope cutthroat populations and possibly manage as a refuge.
		Brook trout	Wild	General\Wild	Reduce numbers to lessen competition and hybridization and help meet native trout goals.
Habitat needs and activities: Continue to manage connectivity to favor native fishes.					
East Fork Bitterroot River and West Fork Bitterroot River Below Painted Rocks Reservoir	56 miles	Bull trout, Westslope cutthroat trout	Wild	Conservation/ Special Regulations	Continue yearlong closure on angling for bull trout and enhance migratory populations for conservation and WCT angling.
		Brown trout	Wild	Special Regulations	Maintain liberal harvest regulations to allow for opportunity to harvest brown trout and reduce competition with and predation on native trout. Consider management that reduces numbers and distribution if it would improve native trout numbers and WCT angling opportunities.
		Rainbow trout	Wild	Special Regulations	Maintain catch-and-release regulations in attempt to improve fishery while recognizing that whirling disease is likely the primary limiting factor.
Habitat needs and activities: Continue to manage connectivity to favor native fishes.					
Tributary streams To the East Fork Bitterroot River and West Fork Bitterroot River Below Painted Rocks Reservoir	>100 miles	Bull trout, Westslope cutthroat trout	Wild	Conservation/ Special Regulations	Conserve and enhance migratory and resident populations. Continue yearlong closure on angling for bull trout and enhance cutthroat fishery. Consider isolation of WCT populations if hybridization is a threat and habitat and numbers are sufficient to allow persistence

Water	Miles/acres	Species	Origin	Management Type	Management Direction
Bitterroot River - Confluence of East and West Forks downstream to Blodgett Creek Near Hamilton	30 miles	Bull trout, Westslope cutthroat trout	Wild	Conservation/ Special Regulations	Continue yearlong closure on angling for bull trout. Enhance fluvial populations of WCT for conservation and angling.
		Rainbow trout, Brown trout	Wild	Special regulations	Maintain present numbers and sizes. Consider management that reduces numbers and distribution if it would improve native trout numbers and WCT angling opportunities.
Habitat needs and activities: Enhance habitat to favor native trout and whitefish.					
Skalkaho Creek	24 miles	Rainbow trout, Brown trout, Brook trout	Wild	General	Maintain liberal harvest opportunity. Consider management that reduces numbers and distribution if it would improve native trout numbers and angling opportunities.
		Bull trout, Westslope cutthroat trout	Wild	Conservation/ Special Regulations	Protect and enhance numbers of fish. Continue yearlong closure on angling for bull trout. Enhance fluvial populations of WCT for conservation and WCT angling.
Tributary Streams to Bitterroot River (other than Skalkaho Creek) from Confluence of East and West Forks Downstream to Blodgett Creek Near Hamilton	>100 miles	Bull trout, Westslope cutthroat trout	Wild	Conservation	Conserve and enhance migratory and resident populations. Continue yearlong closure on angling for bull trout and enhance westslope cutthroat trout fishery. Consider isolation of westslope cutthroat trout populations if hybridization is a threat and habitat and numbers are sufficient to allow persistence.
		Rainbow trout, Brown trout, Brook trout,	Wild	General	Maintain liberal harvest on and consider measures that reduce the abundance in reaches protected by a barrier or in reaches considered native species strongholds.
Lake Como	911 acres	Rainbow trout, Westslope cutthroat trout	Hatchery	Put-Grow-Take	Provide liberal harvest opportunity
Bitterroot River - Blodgett Creek to confluence with Clark Fork Continued on next page	50 miles	Bull trout, Westslope cutthroat trout	Wild	Conservation/ Special Regulations	Continue yearlong closure on angling for bull trout and enhance fluvial WCT populations for conservation and WCT angling.
		Rainbow and Brown trout	Wild	Special Regulations	Manage trout harvest to support quality angling opportunity.

Water	Miles/acres	Species	Origin	Management Type	Management Direction
Habitat needs and activities: Improve habitat to support ecosystem function and production of trout and whitefish. Manage water from Painted Rocks Reservoir to maintain fishery with the goal of 400 cfs to Bell Crossing.					
Tributary streams To Bitterroot River from Blodgett Creek to the Confluence with Clark Fork River	>100 miles	Bull trout, Westslope cutthroat trout	Wild	Conservation/ Special Regulations	Conserve and enhance migratory and resident populations. Continue yearlong closure on angling for bull trout and enhance cutthroat fishery. Consider isolation of westslope cutthroat trout populations if hybridization is a threat and habitat and numbers are sufficient to allow persistence.
		Rainbow trout, Brown trout, Brook trout	Wild	General	Maintain liberal harvest on and consider measures that reduce the abundance in reaches protected by a barrier or in reaches considered native species strongholds. Enhance rainbow and brown trout that provide recruitment to the mainstem and are not located in reaches with abundant native trout.
Hieronymus Pond	2 acres	Rainbow trout	Hatchery	Family Fishing Pond\Put-Grow-Take	Primarily kids fishing pond. Facilitate high catch rates and quality opportunity for kids and handicapped.
		Yellow perch, Largemouth bass	Wild	General	

